

The Changing Landscape of Cooperative Forestry

By Bob Showalter, State Forester of South Carolina

Editors Note: The following was a letter sent to Robert T. Jacobs, Regional Forester with the United States Department of Agriculture Forest Service, Region 8, in Atlanta. It was written in August 2004 by Bob Showalter, Chairman of the Southern Group of State Foresters (SGSF) at the time, regarding an SGSF Review of Cooperative Forestry in the South. The letter gives a very clear picture of forestry in the South now, as well as a glimpse into the future and the challenges facing the states in providing landowner assistance to a rapidly changing customer.

The Southern Group of State Foresters' (SGSF) Executive Committee appointed an ad hoc committee at the request of Ken Arney to review the Region's Cooperative Forestry Unit. The committee was not to review the present structure of Cooperative Forestry but was to offer ideas and assistance in developing a unit with programs and activities that better meet the needs of state foresters and the constituents we serve.

The ad hoc committee under the leadership of Alabama State Forester Tim Boyce met at the regional office this past April and developed its recommendations that were shared with the rest of the state foresters at the SGSF annual meeting in June. We now offer you our perspective on the direction of Cooperative Forestry.

As we see it, human influences provide the dominant impact on southern forests. Negative influences are resulting in the continuing loss of forest resources. We are seeing more downsizing, restructuring and repositioning of our

forest industries and the divestiture of their forestlands. Large blocks of forestland are being broken up as ownership and owner objectives change. The resulting fragmentation, combined with competing uses for the region's remaining forests, places severe strain on the resource. Wood demands continue to increase, and more market share is being satisfied through imports. Depressed domestic markets reduce landowner motivation and incentive to manage their

forests, which will affect forest health and production in the long run. For these reasons, resource management both in rural and community forests should be the major focal point for Cooperative Forestry. We must target the small private landowners and communities to accentuate the positive human influences over our forests. Clearly we have enough forest resources to serve the needs of all our citizens if they are properly managed.

More demands on state forestry agencies dictate that we look at visionary new approaches to rural and community forest management. The one-on-one process of landowner assistance will always have its place, but we must realize the limits such direct involvement places on our ability to significantly impact the rapidly growing number of owners who

need assistance. There is a need to develop new innovative approaches that assist landowner organizations and cooperatives as well as communi-

ty-based organizations to facilitate more involvement in issues and outcomes that affect them and southern forestry. Mentoring programs and group learning processes should be developed. (We can certainly look to the model used by the Cooperative Extension Service; however, the extension model needs to be improved to be more effective.) We need to focus more attention on the relationship between forest resources and a healthy environment. We must be more

vocal in stressing the importance of healthy forests for healthy watersheds and healthy forests to combat air pollution. With the diminishing scale of traditional forest industries, we need to be looking at new, innovative ways to sustain forests and bring forest-related income into our forest communities. We need to be more involved in the understanding and marketing of carbon sequestration credits and various other emerging environmental services that will likely become a major part of forestry. We must improve our ability to assess these issues and deliver the appropriate information and services at the local level.

Many areas of our current Cooperative Forestry programs accentuate positive influences on our forests through rural community assistance, forest product marketing, outreach, stewardship/rural forestry, nursery and tree improvement, and urban and community assistance. These programs provide significant benefits to people and the South's forest resources. However, they should be woven together into a comprehensive whole to more completely and effectively serve our constituents.

Many studies indicate that forest landowners are extremely diverse. This will become even more pronounced as we see a greater influence in our country from Hispanics, African Americans, Asians, and other ethnic groups. Aging "baby boomers" will increase the number of older citizens who own forestland. More women are becoming forest landowners.

Forest landowners are also diverse in their reasons for owning land, although their interest in the economics of forestry and marketing of their "commodities" is still strong. There is a growing interest

There is a need to develop new innovative approaches that assist landowner organizations and cooperatives as well as community-based organizations to facilitate more involvement in issues and outcomes that affect them and southern forestry.

among forest landowners in other resource values such as wildlife management (game and non-game), aesthetics, forest diversity, outdoor recreation, and ecosystem management. Many owners are also interested in multiple land uses that are woven into their forest holdings such as pasture for horses, cattle, small ruminants, fruit and nut trees, wildlife plots, trails, ponds, and lakes. Agroforestry will become an emerging issue for many forest landowners. For these and probably numerous other reasons, Cooperative Forestry should lead the way to reach out to underserved and new forest landowners. Outreach should not be thought of as just serving minority groups; it should be the goal of Cooperative Forestry to develop creative ways to reach the millions of diverse forest landowners in the South who are not taking advantage of current programs nor actively managing their forestland. Outreach can blend well with landowner organizations and cooperatives.

The increasing urban development issues in the wildland urban interface area and the continuing loss of canopy cover in our communities must be addressed. It is critical that Cooperative Forestry provides strong leadership and advanced technical assistance in urban and community forest resource management. No longer are urban and community forestry programs considered public relation tools primarily used to explain forestry to "city dwellers." The profession and practice of managing forest resources located in an urban setting has matured. Today, urban foresters manage the entire forest as a viable, functional, and sustainable ecosystem. We need to manage our urban and community forests as a resource and integrate these resources into the infrastructure of our nation's communities, thereby, making positive changes in the quality and extent of these resources, and ultimately the quality of life for our urban residents.

The loss of and changes to forestland in the South will likely persist, and it will be a continuing challenge to find solutions to address the altering landscape. Therefore, it is critical that State Forestry programs seek to conserve and protect working forests at every opportunity. Cooperative Forestry must continue to provide strong leadership in Forest Legacy. Additionally, Cooperative

Forestry should provide leadership and direction to help states craft other programs, whether through private landowner or community assistance, that would meet their long-term objectives.

Cooperative Forestry should demonstrate an active role in bridging the gap between states' needs and USDA Forest Service Research. Forest product development and marketing of biomass technology is a good example of where state forestry agencies, Cooperative Forestry, Forest Service Research, and forest landowners come together. Cooperative Forestry, working through state foresters, should be the catalyst in helping identify emerging research areas as well as facilitating the distribution of new science and technology. Cooperative Forestry should be a leader in the important role of coordination between the Cooperative Extension Service, southern forestry schools, the Southern Governors' Association, state forestry associations, and state forestry agencies.

Cooperative Forestry should not only be at the cutting edge of forest technology, but it should be the leader in tracking new and emerging issues at the local, state, regional, national, and global levels. Strong ties between southern state foresters, Cooperative Forestry, and the International Forestry staff in Washington should also exist. In other words, Cooperative Forestry should serve the southern region by being the compass that points a clear direction to the future. This would entail combining data to create new, conclusive information that answers the questions of where are we headed, why are we headed in that direction, and do we need to change or hold the course.

Cooperative Forestry should be the catalyst that helps state foresters become more visible in program accomplishment to our partners, the general public, and especially our congressional delegations and state legislators. This role would ensure the creation of a dynamic information bank containing available statistics, GIS data, maps, web sites, and links to state information, etc. The overall goal

of the information bank would be to show how important southern forestry is to citizens and what State and Private Forestry and state forestry organizations contribute to our constituents' success.

Although we receive funding through various federal legislative programs, the rules and legislation are generally written in such a way that many, if not all, of the present "programs" complement each other. Cooperative Forestry should not think of itself as program administrators.

This approach encourages polarization, turf battles, and lack of teamwork. Instead, the unit should be guided by strategic planning with measurable goals and objectives resulting in collaboration, teamwork, and

achievement. The present strategic process being developed within the SGSF could be used as a model. Program reviews of state operations as they are conducted today should be replaced with collaborative goal setting and consultation.

Cooperative Forestry must also identify common and overlapping issues with the Fire and Aviation, Forest Health, and National Forest Units to ensure all aspects of forest resource management are addressed.

In conclusion, the SGSF hopes that you will accept our ideas and recommendations as a sign of our support for the Cooperative Forestry Unit and our willingness to work with you and your staff to ensure that the unit is the best it can be. We also hope the deputy regional forester for State and Private Forestry will work with the SGSF by developing other ad hoc committees to assist the new director and staff of Cooperative Forestry in the refinement of these ideas and recommendations and in the development of a strategic plan for our common future.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank Tim Boyce, Paul Frey, Bob Lazenby, Leah MacSwords, and John Burwell for serving on the committee and Gerald Wicker for his excellent facilitation and note taking. I also want to thank you and Ken Arney for allowing the SGSF to provide our ideas for the future of Cooperative Forestry. ☸

The loss of and changes to forestland in the South will likely persist, and it will be a continuing challenge to find solutions to address the altering landscape.